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Points Of Approach In The Teaching Of Elementary Art History

By ERWIN O. CHRISTENSEN

THE history of art is still a new thing in our college curriculum, and it is still newer with the majority of people who register for it; it is especially new for those who have never before come near the art department of their college. Experience has taught me that it is safest not to assume any clear ideas on the part of the students in regard to the scope and nature of the work. Queer notions and misconceptions are still rampant with the public and our freshmen and sophomores are no exceptions. A remark that a colleague made to me several years ago has lingered in my memory as an example. We were discussing modern French painting and I had commented upon its general excellence. He said he believed it would be better, under the circumstances, for us to supply our need for pictures and other art objects wholly from France. To him, in other words, art was a mercantile commodity; it meant only the product not the act of production. No doubt the analogy of Parisian hats and gowns was latent in his mind. In the light of such experience I feel it is the art instructor's first duty to dispel a few illusions and mistaken ideas. With the publicity given to the sale of "old masters" by our daily and periodical press, particularly whenever enormous sums are involved, it is imperative to point out that a sale price, whether large or small, is not an exact indication of permanent artistic value. In this connection it is pertinent to show that age is in itself no criterion; artistic interest and antiquarian interest are distinct and must be kept so. It is necessary to correct other false impressions which arise from the very term *art*. To many students it suggests the possession of a special talent which the average student knows he lacks.

He may be equally convinced that he will not become an author, yet the study of English composition and of literature are accepted by him without any undue exhibition of stage fright. After these and similar misunderstandings have been cleared away, the instructor can feel freer to develop his subject and can feel more certain that he stands on a common ground with his students.

In the following I wish to suggest four points of approach for a general course in the history of art. The type of course I have in mind would trace the development of occidental art from the days of ancient Egypt to the present. Although each instructor will inevitably decide upon his individual organization of material, proportioning of lectures and conferences, and distribution of time, the suggestions I shall offer will apply *mutatis mutandis* to any course of the above description.

The first point of approach is the introduction to the student of a series of masterpieces, for it is almost axiomatic that a certain familiarity with important monuments is the first, if not the full, aim of a general course. The characteristics of a few superlative works of art can be so firmly impressed on the student's mind that in after life these familiar buildings, statues, and pictures will be recognized at a glance wherever seen. There is a danger of forgetting that the average sophomore or junior in our colleges has not been brought up on masterpieces, whether in reproduction or in the original. Courses in the history of art must work for their own recognition and must build up their own clientele among the students. For the majority, who have little confidence in their artistic ability, the study of interesting monuments with a minimum of laboratory work will make most appeal. Considering the general nature of the course, the fact that it is intended to give a fair idea of the art of many centuries, there is great danger of confusion. For this reason, as well as for the reason that most of the students desire to learn especially about the things with which they will possibly come into contact in later years through reading, conversation, or

travel, a few typical works, including the chief exponents of each period, have to be selected from the many. A variety of names and dates can be avoided, since the purpose of the course is neither chronology nor biography; the necessity of employing some foreign terms creates an equally binding obligation to suppress every unnecessary burden to the memory. An orderly exposition of the chief significant characteristics of a monument with constant reference to an adequate illustration of it on the screen is most productive of good results, for it holds the student's attention and even encourages him to look rather than take notes. The taking of notes while illustrations are being shown may easily become an evil: instead of absorbing through the eye, the student scribbles down, without verifying by his own observation and thus learning to see for himself, a part of what the instructor says.

The second point of approach is the explanation of the particular problems that the artist, or the period as a whole, tried to solve. The student must first be made to understand the aspirations of the architect, sculptor, or painter, in each case, as far as it is possible to set them forth in clear terms. The peculiar difficulties of the artist and the means and methods available for their solution can be discussed. The measure of success will then be gauged by the artist's own standard. It will be the problem of the instructor to present these aims of art in different periods to his audience, to develop the "ideal of beauty," as it has been called, of the particular period, and finally to point out to what extent individuals have come up to the mark of their own setting. The student will learn that different periods have manifested their ideals of beauty along different lines; that when old fields have been exhausted, new ones reflecting better the changed spirit of the age have been conquered. The history of art will then appear not merely as a sequence of good and bad styles, but rather as a succession of different ideals of beauty, each a mode of expression of the civilization of its day. Teaching the history of art in this sense will widen, I hope, the student's range of susceptibility to

beauty in its various aspects. For the moment he must be encouraged to divest himself of his more modern point of view. With a sympathetic understanding for a different atmosphere the student can gradually learn to discover and enjoy beauty in forms that at first acquaintance must seem foreign to him. I am, of course, not deceiving myself that within a limited time all students will gain a fine understanding and feeling for diverse qualities. That can only be achieved by long training and is bound to vary with individual temperaments. We are, after all, chiefly products of our own age, and, in spite of some ability to assimilate different points of view, we are more susceptible to the thing that we can understand automatically. If we remember our own experiences we shall have to admit that our own taste has changed from the time we were first thrilled by a picture for which we have now but a sad smile. At that time we were probably not very different from the average student whom we now propose to instruct. If the instructor treats the history of art as a succession of different ideals of beauty, expressive of their respective cultural epochs, and keeps the discussion of fundamental principles in reserve, I feel a greater intimacy will be established between instructor and student. For the student will feel less restraint when he sees how laws and principles are evolved before his eyes. At least passively he is taking part in their formulation. On the other hand, if the instructor starts out with a standard of perfection, by which he attempts to solve all difficulties, he is more apt to get into the habit of talking over the heads of the students and consequently of losing their interest. The less alert then understand but vaguely why one thing is praised and another condemned.

The third point of approach is the comparison of the various works of art studied. Since it is intended to trace the history of art, it is essential to elucidate the relationships between different works, between different men, between different countries, and between different periods. For example, it can be shown that certain qualities are recurrent because they depend upon

limitations and possibilities inherent in the material used. Some attention must be given to the three important matters, transitions, origins, and influences; but the study of the first must not be pressed too far into the realm of theory, the study of the second must not be exaggerated into a worship of "primitives," and the study of the third must not degenerate into the tedious enumeration of insignificant imitators. By their very nature these subjects are better left to the advanced student.

The fourth point of approach is the demonstration that art is the expression of the people, place, and period which produce it. If we treat the history of art as an integral part of the history of civilization, we must show concrete illustrations of the parallelism between tendencies apparent in architecture, sculpture, painting, or the decorative arts and tendencies in religion, literature, politics, or social life. This, of course, opens up a tremendous field. It can hardly be expected that the art instructor will follow in detail the countless relations and interrelations of art and civilization in general. His illustrations must be condensed to a few pregnant examples. For Greek architecture and sculpture, some corresponding manifestations of the same Greek spirit in the province of drama are appropriate. For the Gothic period, there is a suggestive parallel between mediaeval reasoning, as illustrated in scholasticism, and mediaeval construction, as illustrated in architecture. For the Renaissance and for modern times, parallels of this sort are abundant. In order to have them mean something to the student, however, they must be drawn in a less schematic but more penetrating fashion than Fletcher, for instance, has drawn them in his textbook on architecture. The mere arrangement of a few facts grouped under such headings as history, climate, political and social influences, with very little attempt to establish connections and to show what these things have to do with the art of the time, is almost useless. The less time the instructor is able to devote to this background, against which the thread of his history is to be followed, the more careful he must be to render it with telling strokes. If the student has received in-

spiration in class he is more apt to seek further knowledge in outside reading. Wherever convenient it is stimulating to call attention to allied studies, such as history, literature, and psychology.

It is superfluous to say that these four are not the only four points of approach in a general course in the history of art. They are the ones which I have found most valuable in my own experience. They are, of course, not to be thought of one by one in the order named, but to be utilized collectively. The broadening influence of a course taught in this way accords with the purpose for which the study of art has been introduced into the college curriculum. This purpose is not only to teach artists but more especially to help create a higher standard of understanding and appreciation of art on the part of the public.